

The Moving Image in Space: Public Funding and the Installation Form  
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Set in Motion: The New York State Council on the Arts Celebrates 30 Years of Independents  
(1994)

Over the last 25 years, installations by independent film- and videomakers have created innovative kinds of viewing experiences by dramatically reworking the forms of film, video/television and sculpture. Media arts installations offer a radical integration of moving and stationary elements, of camera images and spatial relations, of time and space. These works often ask the viewer to negotiate a complex arrangement of elements, and to become actively engaged with the work and its setting.

Because the installation form is designed specifically to situate viewers in relationship to the image, and then ask them to reflect precisely on their location, the viewer's presence is often an installation's central focus. Thus, as Margaret Morse has written, it is the visitor rather than the artist who performs the piece in an installation. (1) Consequently, the exhibition context of installations is paramount. Unlike independent films and videotapes, which are usually screened in theatrical contexts or on public television, installations are experienced both spatially and temporally.

Film and video installations originated in the upheaval of the art world during the 1960s, when, in the charged atmosphere of the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements, artists began to question their relationship with audiences, and started producing works that attempted to circumvent the commodity-based gallery system. Many early installations grew out of happenings, performances and other ephemeral, multi-media art events typified by the "Avant-Garde Festival," organized by Charlotte Moorman, in New York. They were often one-time pieces that defied exhibition conventions and pushed at the categories separating art media.

At the same time, in the nascent world of independent video that emerged in the early 1970s, artists began to show videotapes in informal gatherings at alternative spaces such as The Kitchen, the People's Video Theater and Global Village in New York. Although these artists didn't conceive these works as "installations," they were usually exhibited on large banks of TV monitors, reflecting a fascination at the time with the capacities of closed-circuit video for both intimate viewing and spectacular multi-monitor arrays. In fact, it is because of the closed-circuit capacities of the video camera that most installation work in the media arts has been in video.

While its origins can be traced to these avant-garde viewing spaces, the history of video and film installations in New York State reveals, paradoxically, that the installation form has been crucial to the integration of the media arts into the art world mainstream. When people go to museums, they usually spend at most a few minutes with an individual work. As time-based media, film and video have often been awkwardly exhibited in museums and galleries. Many museums have successfully shown films in theaters. But viewing a videotape has, until recent improvements in video projection, often involved sitting in a gallery and changing viewing modes. Unlike films

and videotapes, installations, which are as much sculpture as moving image, engage the viewer spatially as well as temporally. For this reason, installations have been easier to incorporate into the exhibition context of museums.

While some museum collections include film and video installations, for the most part these works have no forms of distribution. Public funding from agencies such as the New York State Council on the Arts has thus been essential to the development and scope of the installation as a unique form. In fact, in many respects, public funding helped to create this art form. The burst of activity in video art and activism in the early 1970s in New York was, in large part, fueled by state monies, which increased significantly at the time. Installations were an integral part of that creative surge.

NYSCA provided much of the production funds for artists to make installations, but more importantly, it was instrumental in establishing the video installation as a medium by funding exhibition spaces. NYSCA money thus facilitated the movement of media art installations from alternative spaces to the mainstream art museums. This integration began with the inclusion of video installations within larger exhibitions and led to the establishment of media departments in some institutions. The Everson Museum in Syracuse was one of the first museums to hire a video curator and to exhibit video installations in the early 1970s, with major exhibitions of work by Nam June Paik, Frank Gillette, Peter Campus and others. In New York City, the Whitney Museum of American Art began exhibiting video in 1971, and by the mid-1970s, was regularly presenting installations in its Film/Video Gallery. In 1979, the museum presented a large-scale group exhibition called “Re/Visions: Projects and Proposals in Film and Video,” which included works by Bill Beirne, William Anastasi, Buky Schwartz, Morgan Fisher, Michael Snow, David Behrman and Bob Diamond, and Robert Watts. The Museum of Modern Art began its “Projects” series in 1971 with an interactive video installation by Keith Sonnier, and established a video department in 1974.

By the 1980s, NYSCA was supporting a broad field of media arts that included the exhibition of installations in alternative spaces and museums, and the funding of critical, curatorial and educational writing about the media arts. Hence, this funding succeeded not only in making New York State the primary site in the country for the production and exhibition of the media arts, but also fostered the critical discourse that defined the field. A wide range of organizations exhibited video installations with NYSCA funds throughout 1980s and into the 1990s, including the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, Hallwalls in Buffalo, the Islip Art Museum, and the East End Arts Council on Long Island, the P. S. 1 Museum and the American Museum of the Moving Image in Queens, and also in New York City, The Kitchen, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, the Alternative Museum, El Museo del Barrio and the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

Two exhibitions signalled video’s “arrival,” so to speak, in the museum world. In 1982, the Whitney Museum of American Art organized a Nam June Paik retrospective, the first American museum exhibition of a video artist. With Paik’s sculptural video works such as TV Chair (1974), TV Clock (1963-81) and TV Garden (1974-78), the show demonstrated the ways in which video in installation form creates a dialogue with other art media in the museum exhibition context. With his installations, Paik’s strategy involves humorously reiterating the

absurdity of the television box as a piece of furniture that undercuts TV's powerful cultural role. In 1987, the Bill Viola retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art was the first recognition by that institution of a video artist with a large-scale exhibition. The show consisted of five installations concerned with rites of passage and video as a means to examine human consciousness.

Both the Paik and Viola exhibitions were notable precisely because their focus on installations allowed for their integration into the museum viewing context. This was an important milestone since one of the consequences of the public funding of installations and video/film work in the art world has been its segregation from other media. Separate funding of film and video allowed museums to create distinct programs and departments for the media arts in order to encourage their growth and visibility. But it also meant that this work was often not exhibited with other media. The Paik and Viola retrospectives pushed at this segregation, and in recent years, the renewed popularity of the installation form in general and the increasing use of various technologies by artists has allowed for some of those boundaries to be transgressed.

At the same time that the field diversified in its exhibition context, it also expanded aesthetically and technologically. Early video installations were, like many videotapes produced in the early 1970s, works that examined the specific properties of video and the viewer's experience of them. Installations by, among others, Peter Campus, Gary Hill, Frank Gillette and Steina and Woody Vasulka, were insistent in examining the immediacy that came from the closed-circuit properties of video, often using on-site cameras to integrate live images of viewers into the work. By the 1980s, however, generalizations about artistic strategies in the media arts were no longer possible, as video became a medium increasingly integrated into diverse work dealing with formal issues, political issues, and a variety of trends in the art world.

Video installations in the late 1980s and 1990s in New York State show how profoundly the field has diversified. While artists such as Mary Lucier and Rita Myers, who have consistently produced installation works since the late 1970s, can be seen as having contributed to the creation of the installation form, there is also what could now be termed a second generation of media arts installation artists. More recently, artists such as Shu Lea Cheang have used the installation form as a means of addressing multicultural issues in a museum context. She has described her work, *Color Schemes* (1990), for instance, as a means of presenting ideas that a decade ago, would have likely been produced in documentary form. By creating a framework in which video images dealing with race are integrated with sculptural elements, Cheang catered her message specifically to the museum context. In addition, some artists have been instrumental in redefining the parameters of the media arts installation. Grahame Weinbren and Roberta Friedman's *The Erl King* (1986), is an interactive installation in which the viewer creates a particular narrative sequence by touching elements of a story on a video screen. In this work, the meaning lies in the viewer's active collaboration with the story's outcome. Thus, new forms of technology continue to extend the installation form.

Perhaps the most revealing testimony of NYSCA's influence in the field of media arts installation is the increased blurring of the boundaries of the field. An array of venues are exhibiting media arts installations by a second generation of video artists, and artists who are not self-identified as video artists are producing media arts installations. This reveals the

establishment of a kind of legitimacy to the field, one fostered by NYSCA and pursued by a range of institutions. Hence, as media arts installations and video art in general are integrated into the art world, their “mediumness” becomes less important than what they say. That is perhaps the real legacy of NYSCA’s funding in the nascent field of the media arts – it helped to render the boundaries between media obsolete.

1. Margaret Morse. “Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image and the Space-in-Between,” in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, edited by Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture, 1990), p. 155.

\*\*“The quality of NYSCA’s leadership has been developed through a critical dialogue with communities made up of individual artists and institutions throughout the state. It is extraordinary history – of innovative collaboration, individual and community initiatives, and productions – which has contributed to defining our visual arts during a remarkable period in late twentieth-century culture.”

-John Hanhardt